



The Strawberry Path in Cambria's Monterey Pine forest. Rick Hawley

### **CAMBRIAN: OPINION**

The difference between preservation, conservation

**BY CONNIE GANNON**

**Special to The Cambrian**

August 29, 2017 04:12 PM

Updated August 29, 2017 04:16 PM

What's in a Name?

Environmental organizations like Greenspace — The Cambria Land Trust often have to explain what we do in terms like conservation, preservation, sustainability and resiliency. Each of these words is useful in context, but they can often be confused, and sometimes lead to misunderstandings about what the organization actually does and the benefits of its work.

Conservation, a term popularized by Gifford Pinchot, the first director of the National Forest Service, focuses on minimizing lasting human harm to nature while extracting or using its resources (like timber or water for agriculture and industry). Preservation, a term associated with such founders of American environmentalism as Aldo Leopold and John Muir, refers to protecting natural places and resources from human impacts.

The difference between conservationists and preservationists came sharply into focus during the Hetch Hetchy Dam controversy in 1906. The Hetch Hetchy valley, north of what would become Yosemite National Park, was nearly as breathtaking as Yosemite Valley itself. It became the target for dam development because of San Francisco's demand for a consistent water source to serve Bay Area development. Although Muir and the new Sierra Club were fiercely opposed to it and rallied thousands in protest, Pinchot and the Forest Service supported damming as "the highest use" for its water resources. The federal government approved the dam in 1913 and Hetch Hetchy was flooded, its diverse resources sacrificed for urban growth.

Today, "conservation" and "preservation" are often used interchangeably, though the latter also refers to protection of historical resources. But the argument continues as to consequences of the respective hands-on or hands-off approaches to the environment implied in the two terms.

### **Cambria's forest**

The Cambria forest presents a classic case of these differing approaches. It has been lived in and used for hundreds of years, first by Native peoples and then by European and American settlers. It is not pristine old-growth forest, having been burned and logged repeatedly. But it comprises largely a unique native species, *Pinus radiata* or Monterey pine, that can be found in only three locations in the U.S. and is an internationally listed endangered species.

What is the "highest use" of these trees? They are the remnant of a vast forest system that once stretched from north of San Francisco almost to San Diego. These literally are the last of their kind. Is there a way to live among them that leaves the forest healthier on its own terms than when people began building in it? Or do we clear parts of it for more human habitations and better ocean views?

Preservationists are often said to be looking backward, toward an idyllic past, while conservationists are deemed to be focused on the reality of the present intertwined relationship between people and their environment. In the epoch which is now called the "Anthropocene" — the era of pervasive human influence in every part of the natural world — the preservationist perspective can be viewed as antiquated and unrealistic.

Yet the reality is that both conservation and preservation are needed. We live in a California that no longer has the luxury of untrammelled mountains and forever rural valleys. It is our responsibility to protect a natural world that is relatively helpless before us. Whole species have vanished due to human takeover of landscapes, creatures with an ecological purpose that our limited points of view don't yet grasp — and may grasp only when it's too late. Migrating steelhead have declined in local creeks from

thousands per year just 50 years ago to fewer than a dozen annually for five years now. Does it matter?

Yes. They belong here. They belonged here before we did, like the Monterey pines and the great herons. Can we conserve the resources we must use while preserving those we think we don't need — trees, native plants, wild creatures, watershed slopes? Can we say no to certain types of development, do without some advantages we might enjoy, to preserve the last wildness in our tamed landscapes?

In this conflicted moment in Earth's history, we talk of sustainability. Sustainable agriculture, but also sustainable coal. Sustainable growth. Sustainable water facilities. What is being sustained? By whom and for whom? To sustain something simply means to carry it forward, to keep it going. Do we want to carry forward a lifestyle that costs other species and our own descendants their wellbeing?

### **Sustainable or resilient?**

“Sustainable” properly describes a resource that renews and does not ruin ecosystems in its use. So nuclear power isn't sustainable, because even though it doesn't run out, an accident or lack of storage for its ongoing waste could ruin water, air, soil. Continuity is only one part of the equation — damage is the other.

The term “resilient” seems to be replacing “sustainable” in describing communities, ecosystems and economies as we come face to face with climate change. Resilience means the ability to withstand assaults and come back. It implies individual and system capability to adapt to change.

It's critical not to be fatalistic about resilience — “There's nothing that we can do but adapt.” The reality is that there is much we can do in adapting to sustain, and also restore. Decreasing our dependence on fossil fuels, for example, not only slows the rate of carbon emissions, it also means ocean warming will slow. Organisms threatened by warming may recover viable population thresholds. And the systems they affect may also survive.

In the Anthropocene, we are more responsible than ever for our actions vis a vis our world. We have the power not only to conserve (do less harm) or preserve (do no harm), but also to restore. Perhaps environmental restoration is the term for this time. The reality is that someday we may need the parts of the world that are disappearing — there may be human uses of nature that are not about consuming, but rather partaking. Perhaps an ethic of restoring, of holding in trust would be a good goal for us as Anthropocene migrants, settled in this place that needs our concern and kindness.

The Greenspace column appears quarterly and is special to The Cambrian. Email Greenspace at [info@greenspacecambria.org](mailto:info@greenspacecambria.org) or visit the website [www.greenspacecambria.org](http://www.greenspacecambria.org).